Sibling narratives of autistic play culture

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Introduction: Enjoyment as a framework for analysis

Episodes of enjoyment and feelings of personal pleasure add value to human experience and are recognised as essential to healthy functioning and development in the individual (Panksepp 1998, Rochat 2011). It is surprising therefore that these emotions are so overlooked in relation to autism and that a strongly dominant focus exists on deficit and the difficulties that people face (Murray 2008, Broderick and Ne'eman 2008). This is in spite of the fact that autobiographies produced by autistic writers provide many accounts of enjoyable solitary and shared activity, illustrating how enjoyment is well within the experience of being autistic. Autistic autobiographies, which usually begin with the author's childhood, sometimes include descriptions of play that was enjoyably carried out with a sibling or friend, noting that this provided pleasure and entertainment to the author as a child, but also and equally to the sibling or friend with whom they played. Tammet (2006), for example, describes the enjoyable 'hours at a time' spent playing with his siblings, who happily participated in his game of sorting, ordering and cataloguing books and another of playing at ironing, sorting and stacking clothes. Purkis (2006) says that she and her brother Dean played elaborate card games 'for years' and with 'quirky' characters that Dean liked to invent, whilst Hadcroft (2005) writes of his school friend, Karl, who loved to share his 'outlandish fantasies' and 'overactive imagination'.

Autistic autobiographies provide descriptions of layered experiences of interaction that give rise to both negative and positive feelings and a range of responses, from confusion, frustration and distress to satisfaction, pleasure and joy. Published personal accounts by siblings, however, usually lack this kind of richness of detail, particularly in relation to positive interactions with their autistic sister or brother. In line with many parental accounts, accounts by siblings often use the 'personal tragedy' construct of autism to underline the difficulties faced by their families, for example, in struggling to understand their sibling, access local services for family support, or deal with perceived social stigma amongst friends and in the community (Barnhill 2007, Greenfeld 2009). In sibling accounts, there is often a tension within the text between,

on the one hand, not understanding the autistic sibling and experiencing him or her as enigmatic, unknowable and an outsider within the family, and on the other hand, knowing the sibling all too well in terms of their behaviour and feeling frustrated, annoyed or angered by it (Ariel and Naseef 2006, Karasik and Karasik 2003). There may be some recognition that interactions were both negatively and positively experienced, with neurotypical siblings describing situations of embarrassment, shame and anger, but also the 'great time', 'fond memories' and 'laughs' they had with their sister or brother (Johnson and van Rensselaer 2010). However, details about these positive experiences are always much less defined and much more quickly passed over than descriptions of negative ones. This kind of discrimination between positive and negative experiences serves to remind us that positioning of individual views in relation to the different discourses of autism is an important part of the meaning of personal accounts (Waltz 2005).

The childhood games that siblings describe as ones that were enjoyably played can be categorised as types of play typically associated with autistic children, as identified in personal accounts by autistic writers and by research into autism and play (see for example Conn 2015, Doody and Mertz 2013, El-Ghoroury and Romanczyk 1999, Holmes and Willoughby 2005). These categories include sensory and perceptual play, physical play, construction play, play which has clear interactive and predictable turns, play with reduced amounts of verbal participation, and orderly play with objects and words. In teenage accounts from the book compilation *Siblings: the Autism Spectrum Through Our Eyes*, for example, physical and sensory games are mostly described, such as running races, swinging, climbing and homemade trapeze, doing dance routines, playing with animal sounds and sound effects, playing rock-paper-scissors, tickling, tag, running round the house, bike riding and swimming. One girl writes that she taught her brother to play a *George of the Jungle* game on swings that she had invented and 'was thrilled' by the call her brother shouted when playing the game, which sounded 'just like a copy of the soundtrack' (Johnson and van Rensselaer 2010, page 47). Another remarks that she watched her brother flick the pages of a book because 'I sort of like it' (page 29).

What is often mentioned in published sibling accounts is that games had to be played in a particular way or carefully worked out so that they suited both play partners. This

reflects accounts by autistic writers who also note that play involved qualitative differences in interaction, such as greater sensitivity to one partner's play needs, more acceptance of one person's play ideas, and a shared preference for non-verbal interactions or of 'quirky' interests that are perceived by others as outside of a perceived norm (Davide-Rivera 2012, Grandin and Scariano 1986, Hadcroft 2005, Willey 1999). Such patterns of behaviour suggest the existence of an autistic play culture that exists in a unique way (Corsaro and Johannesen 2007) and demand a 'presumption of competence' in the way Biklen (2005) contends. However, the existence of considerable variation in descriptions of autistic play and friendship necessitates a conceptualisation of experiences of shared play that is non-reductionist in its approach and takes proper account of the complexity of human engagement.

Play, along with other ways of being for the autistic individual, has tended to be conceptualised in essentialist ways: as something children simply can or cannot do (Biklen 2005). In his book on the nature of autistic-neurotypical interactions, Hendriks (2012) argues that dominant theories of autism have taken an essentialist approach and dichotomized constructs, for example, researcher/subject, autistic/neurotypical, having/lacking a theory of mind. He sees this as a way of simplifying variables within a predominantly positivist approach to the study of autism, but argues that this glosses over what is shared between people. As Hendriks points out, real life interaction is more complex than this and driven by people continually trying to find ways to share meaning and engage with one another, in spite of any difficulties. Hendriks's arguments are aligned with a social constructionist ontology that rejects the idea of human engagement as disengaged, representational and subject to a fixed underlying natural order. Indeed, recent micro-level research into moments of interactional experience for autistic children offer illustrations of them trying to make sense of social situations and demonstrating agency in social participation (Ochs 2015, Solomon 2015), and provide powerful arguments that a social constructionist ontology should apply for autistic people too.

The aim of this study was to gain information about children's actual engagement in sibling play, including details of games that were mutually enjoyed and meanings that were shared. This was with the view of providing 'enabling narratives of autism', ones that challenge a deficit model of autism, question the assumption of normative

values and contribute to the development of more inclusive and non-reductionist analytic frameworks (Davidson and Orsini 2013). The specific research questions addressed what games were enjoyed by sibling participants, how play episodes were framed, what was valued by the non-autistic play partner and how they understand the shared nature of play. Of interest was how siblings made sense of their enjoyment of childhood play and understood themselves as engaged and committed childhood play partners. In identifying the aim of the study, Appreciative Inquiry as an approach to research was an influence. Appreciative Inquiry seeks to engage with the complexities of organizational and human systems and uses a positive bias within scholarship to identify what works as a way of bringing about change (Zandee and Cooperrider 2013). We felt that appreciation or valuing of children's experiences of shared play has the potential of transforming mindsets in relation to autism and the possibility of making an important contribution to future change in relation to autism theory and practice. As Watkins et al. (2011) argue in writing about Appreciative Inquiry, deficit-focused inquiry leads to the gathering of information about problems to be solved, but positive-focused inquiry seeks information about what is working in human relationships. We felt that this was important information to gather since it could contribute to the development of narratives of autism that produce transformative mindsets and more acceptance of autistic individuals as they are.

Method

The study was centrally concerned with the construction of personal accounts and the question 'how do you understand what happened' in relation to childhood play. The ways in which episodes of play were framed and therefore understood by play partners was a key focus for the research. The way in which an episode of play is framed should be recognizable to other players and dictates to some extent what happens in play, players employing their existing knowledge of the particular culture being produced, though also adding new ideas as the play progresses (Sturrock and Else 1998). It was felt that narrative analysis was the most suitable approach since this focuses on the particular in human action and interaction and is much less concerned with making general points about a topic (Bryman 2015). Narrative analysis is useful for learning more about unique human experiences that are not well understood (Chase 2005), which was also a consideration for this study.

Participants were sought amongst non-autistic adult siblings who identified as having positive experiences of sibling childhood play. Recruitment was initially carried out through an email announcement to a large local autism stakeholder group, but uptake from this was poor. In talking about the study to interested parties, the researchers realized that positioning enjoyment as the focus of a research project on autism troubled potential participants since it challenged a more dominant discourse about the difficulties that families face. Following this, recruitment was conducted carefully through personal and professional contacts, with more explanation provided about the rationale of the study, that is, that a focus on enjoyment and what is shared was believed to have the potential to support learning and bring about change than a focus on deficit. This was also something that was done in some of the interviews, with the researcher saying much more about the purpose of the study than is usually the case within narrative research. In writing about the ethical attitude in narrative research, Josselson (2007) points out that a balance needs to be struck between transparency of purpose and not unduly influencing the participant's story. However, there is also the notion that narrative research is in essence a 'joint production' of the researcher and the narrator, who constructs their story interactively and in response to the particular circumstances of the interview situation (Chase 2005). In this instance, we felt it was important to acknowledge that we knew autism can result in difficult personal circumstances whilst sharing the reasoning behind our focus on positive experiences, and in this way perhaps open up the possibility to participants of participating in an alternative discourse of autism.

Single interviews were carried out with three adult siblings who were invited to share their stories in response to broad questions such as 'Can you tell me about the games you played with your sibling…' and 'What did you enjoy about that game…?'. Interviews took place within one meeting in participants' workplace or a community setting, with further contact taking place in order to get participant feedback on the write up of findings. All interviews were transcribed and analysed for information related to the research questions. Analysis of data focused straightforwardly on what was said within narratives rather than on structural issues, such as how the participant constructed what is autism (Riessman 2008). In writing up findings, narratives were kept intact as far as possible, though presented here according to the research questions.

Findings

Participant 1 – Nathan

Details of enjoyable games and play frames used

Nathan is in his late teens and a middle brother of three boys. There is an age gap of five years between him and his older brother, who has a diagnosis of autism, and of nearly four years with his younger brother. He remembers enjoyable play experiences with both brothers though not of all three playing together because of the age difference. Of his play with his older brother, he remembers most fondly games they played that involved constructing houses using large cushions from the sofa in the living room of their family home. They created different structures in this game and used them to 'live in', getting food from the kitchen and spending 'a lot of time' inside. Nathan described these houses as large with different compartments which gave the feel of 'camping in the house'. He said that most of the games he played with his older brother involved elaborate construction play of some sort, often also involving Duplo or Lego bricks. He remembers that, for a time, he and his brother used to build the same thing over and over again; a pyramid that was elaborately constructed from bricks, with a stepped design that was difficult to build and that involved 'using every single one of the blocks we had'. These pyramid structures would have 'things in the middle of it, like a computer', that is, a brick with a specific graphic design. Nathan described other structures too, such as 'the highest tower out of Lego'. He remembers that, once built, his brother would insist a structure remained intact for a long time and would often put it on show 'like a work of art'.

Nathan said that he and his brother tried to recreate real life experiences using construction and small world play. For example, he remembers with fondness a time when he and his brother tried to recreate a stunt show they had seen with toy cars and a car mat. They created a track like the one in the stunt show and built ramps out of blocks to flip their toy cars over, enacting car crashes and taking drivers to hospital, which was also a created structure on the mat. Nathan's father made a garage out of wood which Nathan enjoyably used for car play. His brother also made an ice-cream van out of 'massive cardboard boxes' which their father brought home from work. He described how they cut out a large hole for the serving hatch and drew a menu on the

side and pretended to serve ice-creams from the van, playing this game ‘again and again’ for an extended period of time.

The large cardboard boxes were also used to make houses and vehicle-type structures. Nathan described these as often very inventively made and, in the case of the vehicle structures, sometimes even had wheels attached to them. Everyday items were often used for pretend play, for example, a big wooden cart in his grandfather’s garden that Nathan and his brother used to play a game called Robin Hood. This game involved the two boys being pulled around in the cart whilst they pretended to fire arrows at imaginary enemies. Much of the construction play described by Nathan involved sharing ideas, but some play was carried out in a separate way with each brother making a structure of their own within a shared space. A rug in their family home, for example, was often used as a play landscape such as a beach where they singly created their own structures but pretended they were part of a general play scene.

Computer games were also a feature of play for Nathan and his brother, for example, James Bond, Mario Kart and Pokémon. Computer games might also support fantasy play and Nathan remembers playing a Donkey Kong game on family days out ‘to the forest and to castles and places like that’. The game consisted of the boys pretending to be monkeys ‘and stuff like that’, jumping around as if they were in the jungle and fighting off monsters with big sticks.

How the shared nature of play is understood

An important feature of how Nathan understands his play experience with his older brother is in terms of the age difference that exists between them. Nathan described his brother as always leading the play and initiating interesting or exciting play frames, such as building a house or recreating a scene, which Nathan then participated in with enjoyment. In relation to their construction play, Nathan described his brother as always having ‘to be in charge of what was being built’, but that this was something that he saw as appropriate to his status as the older sibling and having more sophisticated play ideas. Nathan described his brother as having very good play ideas and a ‘broader imagination’ and finding it ‘easier to think of different things we could do which I enjoyed’. Nathan commented that when it came to him leading play with his younger brother, he often used ideas from play he had enjoyed with his older

sibling. Nathan says that he did not mind that his older brother directed the play and comments:

> I think usually you look up to your older siblings as a younger sibling and I just sort of trusted him to have the good ideas because he was older than me and had broader experiences.

Though there were occasions when the level of control exerted by Nathan's brother in play caused friction with Nathan, the rarity of these occasions was attributed by Nathan to his own easy-going nature. He remarked, 'I think I was always quite easy, easy going about it all', and recalled that there would be much more conflict within play when more children were involved. He believes that shared play was supported by the fact that he had an equal fascination in the real life events that he and his brother reproduced in play and an appreciation of the sometimes highly inventive or complex way in which these were conceived of by his brother. Some ideas he said were 'our ideas' and much of play was described as based on mutual interests.

A further way in which play was narrated, particularly in relation to construction play, was as something that took place within a family culture of building things. Nathan mentioned his father and mother supporting the play several times, for example, by providing interesting materials, helping the boys to cut something out or make something, and taking photographs of structures once they were made. Nathan described his grandfather too as someone who was 'always doing DIY and things in the garden'. He built a small workbench for the boys and supplied them with their own tools, 'just for us to use'. Nathan explained that he and his brother built things regularly at his grandfather's nearby house which they took back to their own house to play with, commenting 'yeah, it was good'. Nathan mentioned the fact that his brother's creations were often particularly noteworthy, saying:

> I do remember there being lots of things with wheels and y'know your imagination runs wild when you're little and you think you're going to build this amazing thing and then it comes out like something quite bizarre like that but…it's quite a creative contraption.

Participant 2 – Matt

Details of enjoyable games and play frames used

Matt is two years younger than his only brother, who has a diagnosis of autism, and has no other siblings. Now in his late thirties, he says he has many fond memories of

playing with his brother when he was small and in his pre-teen years. He described much of their play as ‘car related’, ‘quite organised’ and competitive in nature. One car game that was very enjoyably played by Matt was that of car crashes. In this game, he and his brother sat two or three metres apart facing each other and pushed a toy car with all their strength at the other’s car so that it would crash. Matt said, ‘We used to really enjoy that’ and explained that the object of the game was partly to see whose car was the ‘strongest and toughest’ and could dent the other car. Matt described playing the game in the long hallway of the family home which provided an especially good play space, though the boys had to move the game elsewhere once their parents realized why the skirting boards in the hall were getting damaged. Matt also described playing stunt man crashes in the family garden. This game involved piling up ‘loads of cardboard boxes’ against one wall and then crashing into them on bikes, Matt on a three-wheeler bike and his brother on a two-wheeler. He said of the game:

> Our garden was quite small but we just had one long path and you’d ride the bike fast as you could down the garden path into these boxes to make a big demolition, but then of course we probably spent about five times as long stacking boxes back up as that moment of destroying them, and y’know at that point in life, when I think back now, some of the games were quite organised, but it was really we just set them up and we just played them.

Matt said that other favourite types of play were playfighting, wrestling and physical play. He described competitive and highly physical games where he and his brother would set a challenge and then try to beat the other one, for example, to be the first to wrestle the other to the floor or give the other a dead arm. Matt described the play as ‘never with the intent of actually hurting’ the other, but much more a form of competition to see who was the first or best at something and always carried out in a very organized way:

> It’s going to sound quite wrong now because sometimes, in quite an organised way, we’d have certain challenges where sometimes you’re on a sofa and the first one to get the other one on the floor would win. Sometimes it was just you were allowed to hit each other between shoulders and waist.

Matt said that, though both he and his brother were ‘well behaved children’, the playfighting was often a ‘real battle’ between them, with a set time limit that they had agreed beforehand. He said that both he and his brother really enjoyed this, but had to

carry out the play before their mother came home from work. When she came into the house, Matt said, ‘we’d both be hot and bothered, but we’d be happy reading’.

Physical play also involved ‘chasing each other round the house’ and jumping off things. Jumping off the stairs or the back of the sofa were other competitive games that were played to see who could jump from the highest step or jump the furthest onto the floor. Matt remembered:

> We’d make up a challenge and go with it and we both sort of thrived on that and enjoyed that. When we’d go to sand dunes and be jumping off the top of them and it’d be who could make the furthest mark in the sand.

Other games described by Matt include playing card games, building things and sport play. Matt described himself as wanting to do sport play more and more as he got older, often wanting to play a football match with his brother and other children. He recalled that it was really only with this play that conflict with his brother ensued. He explained that he often wanted to play a match as a team, but that his brother wanted to recreate the ball skills of football players he had seen on television and usually refused to pass the ball.

How the shared nature of play is understood

Like the previous narrator, Nathan, Matt also understands his particular experience of childhood play as related to the age difference between him and his brother and the fact that he is the younger sibling. He described his brother as leading the play, ‘not in an authoritative way’, but more because he had ‘better ideas’ and superior skills. Matt said he looked up to his brother and was more than happy to go along with the play because of the enjoyment he derived from it. He thinks the highly competitive nature of the play did not cause arguments between them for this reason, and that, as Matt got older and asserted his ideas more in the play, more friction occurred as a consequence. Matt described the highly physical nature of the play as suiting his personality well because, as he said, he is ‘very sports minded’. Though games might have appeared to an outsider to be very aggressive, Matt pointed out that as a child he felt a complete sense of shared enjoyment and a total commitment to the play, which he thinks is typical of the way boys play together and ‘quite normal’:

> Our childhood play was quite normal and I’ve got really, really happy memories of it and I think that as a young child there was no, between me and my sibling, there was nothing, there was no difference really, I think.

Children's assessments of what to play and how to play it are invariably contingent on the equipment available and the environmental affordances of the play space. Matt felt that he and his brother were aligned in making these kinds of assessments, the use of the long hallway to play car crashes, for example, or what type of ball was available suggesting how a game would be framed. His account reveals that a further factor in making decisions about what to play was the presence or absence of another person. Matt's descriptions suggest that, as a child, he judged what is appropriate in play partly on the context in which it was occurring, so that intense but enjoyable physical play was appropriate, but only when there was an absence of his mother and therefore of adult supervision.

Participant 3 – Jeanie

Details of enjoyable games and play frames used

Jeanie is in her forties and works as an artist and sculptor. She is twenty months older than her brother, who has a diagnosis of autism, but recalls that, whilst this is close in age, she and her brother played individually for much of the time as children. Her brother had a 'very, very close' friend as a child, the two boys going 'everywhere together', and Jeanie recalled that she used to 'tag along and join in their games' even though she was 'a bit older than them'. Jeanie said that shared play with her brother mostly occurred 'outdoors', in the grounds of the abbey where the family lived. She described how her parents encouraged the children to play outside. 'We were expected to be out', she remembers of her parents, and the freedom of the abbey meant the two children had 'loads of free range play'. Play involved physical games, such as winter sledging and 'pushing my brother in a plastic wheel barrow in the snow', and also holding 'pretend services' in a side chapel of the abbey. Jeanie remembered that she found the physical play 'hilarious' and that the imaginative games were based on her ideas, but that her brother 'would join in with that'.

Jeanie recounted that she and her brother were both 'really into Lego' and that this play became 'a major, major thing':

> The Lego was excellent. There was a lot of shared play with Lego and we'd sit with a huge pile, and spread it out in front of us on the floor both making things and spend long periods of time doing that.

When the first Star Wars film was released in cinemas, Jeanie recalled, ‘I was absolutely obsessed and I had loads and loads of Star Wars figures’. Jeanie’s brother was ‘still really into Lego at that point’ and he would participate in creating play landscapes which Jeanie then used in her imaginative play with the Star Wars figures. She described her brother as ‘liking the making’, but that ‘once he’d made it, he wasn’t that interested’. However, his Lego structures were particularly good for her Star Wars play and together they used objects in the home environment to create Star Wars landscapes. For example, a pair of ‘really long curtains in the living room’, that draped onto the floor and created folds, were used as a landscape into which her brother placed his Lego structures. In turn, these were used by Jeanie to carry out imaginative play – for as long as her brother did not need the Lego bricks for the making of another structure. Jeanie said that her brother might take bricks for his ‘next big construction project’ with little consideration given to whether she had finished her imaginative play.

Jeanie remembered that she and her brother continued to spend time together until their early teens. At this point the interactions involved less imaginative play, but they continued to interact playfully outdoors. Jeanie described building dens together, using a space at the end of the family garage as well as in the local park that they would go back to time and time again. During the winter they went sledging and one year built a sled run that was so deep ‘it could actually have a toboggan run built into it’. She described ‘really lovely’ times when they simply messed about in the garden and ‘had a really good laugh together’. One such time, brother invented a ‘projectile thing’ that returned tennis balls to the courts next door because ‘he got sick of throwing them back over the fence’.

How the shared nature of play is understood

Jeanie sees the close age difference between her and her brother as something that might have supported shared play, and attributes the fact that they did not always share play to their different personalities. Jeanie described herself as a child who was interested in being outside and ‘stopping to look at tiny things in between rocks and insects and slugs and things like that’, whilst her brother was quite the opposite. She described him as interested in ‘man made everything’ and ‘fascinated by tractors and vehicles’:

> I mean ASD aside, he has always had very different interests, different music tastes. He's got a sweet tooth and I don't - you know, just almost kind of everything.

She pointed out that, though they were siblings who 'bickered all of the time', it did not mean that they did not have 'fun together'. Jeanie described herself as often leading the play and her brother as a willing play partner in this. However, she also described herself responding with interest to some play frames created by her brother, for example, constructing something together or a physical game. A shared interest in construction play is seen as supporting more elaborate and sustained play episodes, which were also suggested by affordances in the home and outdoor spaces.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gather detailed information about childhood games that were enjoyably played by three non-autistic adults with their autistic sibling. This was with the purpose of finding out more about what is seen as of value in shared play and how non-autistic siblings make sense of their play experience. What is apparent from the narratives provided is that play frames created by the autistic sibling were mostly recognizable to their non-autistic brother or sister. Children use play frames to set boundaries in play and communicate the meaning of what is being created (Davy and Gallagher 2006). Examples of play frames in the narrative of participant 1, Nathan, include building complex structures which contain a hidden item, camping, heroically fighting baddies (ie. Robin Hood), and serving food in a public place. For Matt, play frames included competitive fighting and comparative strength or agility, speed and destruction, and competing in a sport. Children's play frames reference the wider world in particular ways and is the child's attempt to create meaning in play. The success of a play episode depends on the capacity of any play partners to recognize and be excited by the ideas that are being reproduced, and so be sufficiently motivated to participate in the play frame as set out (Sturrock and Else 1998). Many successful play episodes are narrated here and the sustained experience of these suggests that play unfolded in a way that made sense to both play partners too. Some difficulty in this is noted. For example, Jeanie describes how she was able to share play ideas with her brother, but only up to a point, the construction of a play scene being possible but not the sharing of an unfolding play narrative. Details from the other two participants also point to the fact that the shared nature of play was dependent on a strong level of

control by the older autistic sibling, though this was not experienced as a problem and added to the value of the play experience for the non-autistic sibling. Needing to control the play did present problems when a larger number of players were involved, however, or when a non-autistic player wanted to impose their own play frame.

The existence of shared play experiences, which occur even in the face of some social communication difficulty, puts forward the idea that when we engage with someone we do so on the basis of 'thin knowledge' of the other (Avramides 2013). Conceptualisation of what is autism has traditionally put forward the idea that when human beings interact they must have a thorough understanding of other minds and full knowledge of a person's intentions and meanings, that is 'thick knowledge' of the other (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985). More recent theorizing of perception within interaction argues that we interact with others on the basis of our practical understandings of the world and that it is only when what we expect to happen is contradicted that we begin to speculate about the other's intentions (Avramides 2013, McGeer 2004). From descriptions provided here, it seems as if expectations about what will happen were based on known relationships and social structures, including what was understood about the ordinary dynamic of relationship between children of different ages, and the ordinary use of environmental affordances of objects and settings in play. In fact, rather than the innate capacities of the play partner, a much more important consideration seems to have been the understanding that different norms operated in different social contexts, with close assessments being made of the cultural appropriateness of actions in relation to particular contexts, for example, the absence of adult supervision allowing transgression of norms about physical contact.

Much of what is illustrated in these narrative accounts is typical of autistic play culture described elsewhere (Doody and Mertz 2013, Holmes and Willoughby 2005). Physical play, elaborate construction play with a strong visual component, and play which involves straightforward interactions with one person only and control by one play partner are all features of play described in accounts provided by autistic writers (Birch 2003, Gerland 1997, Lawson 2006). Participants reported that they enjoyed many aspects of this play culture, even though some aspects gave rise to a degree of uncertainty. The intensity of the physical engagement for Matt, for example, suggests that the experience of the other in this case was outside of ordinary expectations, but

was experienced nevertheless as very exciting. What is apparent is that this may not have been the case for someone who was not so inclined towards physical activity. In her analysis of experiences of interaction for autistic children, Solomon (2015) shows that sociality is less a quality of one individual and more an accomplishment between people that depends on their particular understandings of self and other and of possible forms for action that operate at the time. For Matt, it seems that real contact with the other was possible because of what he as well as his brother brought to the situation, and this could probably be said of the other participants too.

Conclusion

What emerges from the data gathered for this study is the individualized nature of influences on interactional moments, the interactive way they unfold, and the contextualized nature of meanings that are derived. Findings such as these reported here contribute to the need for greater emphasis on the particularities of the social contexts in which autistic play takes place and more focus on the positive ways in which children engage with each other. They also draw attention to the fact that dominant discourses of autism often privilege terms that desaturate the real life presence of people, their humanity, their unique interests and experiences, and the individuality with which they engage. Research into autism would perhaps benefit from trying to convey more of a sense of the uniqueness of people's participation in culture, the democratic nature of relations between them and continuities in interaction with human experience in general.

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